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Congress digs in for key role in intelligence

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The first round in the struggle between President Ford and Congress over control of the American intelligence community is expected to be won by Congress.

In the next few days the Senate, it is thought, will take the first big step toward creating its own permanent intelligence watchdog committee, instead of the joint Senate-House panel which the White House strongly prefers.

The House is likely to follow the Senate's lead.

But the outcome of the next round in the contest between the President and Congress — whether lawmakers, through their new committees, should be given a veto power over covert intelligence operations — is less certain.

The President's new CIA director, George Bush, at a breakfast meeting Thursday (Feb. 19) with reporters, voiced his "personal opinion" against prior congressional approval, but said he could live with it.

Congressional leaders themselves are divided.

Senate Majority Leader Mike Mansfield (D) of Montana favors the right of veto by the full Senate within 30 days to confirm intelligence committee disapproval of a covert operation.

But most of the Senate's soon-to-expire intelligence investigation committee (eight of its 11 members) reject a congressional veto because — in the words of chairman Frank Church (D) of Idaho — it would "usurp the role of the President as the final arbiter of foreign policy."

An aide of the Senate Government Operations Committee, which began Thursday (Feb. 19) putting final touches on a bill for the full Senate, calls the idea of separate committee for each branch of Congress "the one

point on which just about everyone [in Congress] agrees."

The difference between one committee or two may seem minor, but the underlying motive is fundamental. Creating a joint committee requires the President's signature, giving Mr. Ford a veto power which many lawmakers worry that he could use to force the committee to be structured the way he wants.

Separate Senate and House panels require simple parliamentary resolutions and no presidential approval.

Reducing the number of congressional committees monitoring the intelligence community from the current six to just two should foster "a better relationship" without rivalry and conflict, a Senate aide says.

But concern is growing in Congress over two other aspects of the intelligence community's new command structure:

- The President's new "independent" board, which will oversee intelligence operations, is made up of three men — retired diplomat Robert D. Murphy, former Army Secretary (1964-65) Stephen Ailes, and economist Leo Cherne — who support covert activity.

- The new charter which Mr. Ford issued "to improve the performance of the intelligence agencies and restore public confidence in them" gives official approval to many controversial practices which have tended to undermine public trust — domestic surveillance of Americans, infiltration of certain American groups, covert aid to universities, and any undercover activities abroad except assassinations.